# 10     The role of adult learning in the community in strengthening democratic participatory practices

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## 10.1     Introduction

After the 2008 global economic crisis, the world is facing yet another upheaval, maybe the first planetary health crisis, reaching every corner of human habitat and culture (with some exceptions). The ability to deal with uncertainty is becoming a crucial issue, and the unexpected is becoming the norm (Heffernan, 2019). Ideas about new skills, upskilling and lifelong learning seem to be barely enough in a contemporary context, as in the past few decades the world has gone from complicated to complex. According to Heffernan (2019), the complex means either the absence of patterns, or if there are patterns, they don't repeat themselves regularly, meaning small changes can have a big impact, and expertise and efficiency don't suffice. Barnett (2000) uses the term supercomplexity to point to a form knowledge which is not an end in itself, and can be addressed only if inextricably embedded within certain social, political and cultural contexts.

Unfortunately, current adult learning and education thought and practice, being strongly influenced by neoliberalism, do not support these trends, especially considering the shift of lifelong education into lifelong learning (Barros, 2012). Jelenc Krašovec (2012) pointed out that "the move into the field of the neoliberal paradigm was accompanied by the sudden enthusiasm for the concept of lifelong learning, which ensured that the understanding of this notion changed into the exact opposite of its original meaning" (p. 85). The meaning of an educated person has lost universal emancipatory connotation, and adult education has become more commodified. "Because LLL [lifelong learning] is understood as a market discourse that brings education closer to entrepreneurship, the individual is becoming its own *learning entrepreneur*" (Jelenc Krašovec, 2012, p. 87). The responsibility for adult education switched to an individual level. Moreover, "with the disintegration of community values and the emphasis on individualism we are currently killing the enlightening influence of general adult education, the quality and dignity of human existence, and diminishing equality and justice" (Jelenc Krašovec, 2012, p. 85).

Despite this neoliberal influence, adult education has been important as a key agent and resource for civic education understood as a process of learning democracy

(Martin, 2003). However, in that process adult education should not develop an informed individual citizen, but rather should foster the development of "cultural/ political social activists who are encouraged to manifest their beliefs with the ultimate goal of fighting oppression and furthering social justice" (Pruyn, 2003, as cited in Pruyn et al., 2018, p. 40). The best approach to research democracy and adult education could be creating insight into a community and its own decision-making process. New resources for an unpredictable age are renewed bonds of solidarity, coalition-building, imagination and creativity, i.e. skills that are best developed through intense community engagement. These skills can prepare us for uncertainty. "They aren't efficient, but they give us limitless capacity for adaptation, variation and invention. And the less we know about the future, the more we're going to need these tremendous sources of human, messy, unpredictable skills" (Heffernan, 2019, 10:35). Evidently, these are at their core social skills, and are to be developed and nurtured through joint action within community settings. From that arises a fundamental competency of how to intervene in life, as we are not in the world to adapt to it, but to transform it (Freire, 2004). It is not possible to change the world simply by imagining it, but rather with engaging in the practices consistent with that vision.

Therefore, community-oriented educators should contribute to developing pedagogies that facilitate the re-emergence of participatory practices and genuine democratic education and learning across a wider range of public and cultural pedagogical spaces. Jelenc Krašovec with colleagues (2017) argues that "self-initiated activities are giving power to members of the community but at the same time showing openness also towards visitors and other people coming" (p. 67). These findings show that learning with others in open spaces could transform ourselves and our environment. Experimenting with public spaces can pave the way for improvement of the democratic processes in communities. Even more, taking over and organising public spaces can be part of the wider global movement of squatting, collective housing projects or establishing autonomous zones. By participating, even temporarily, in these kinds of initiatives we can learn a lot of possible alternative futures.

We are at the time when democratic public life seems to be in crisis, and the revival of core democratic competencies, capacities and commitments seems desperately necessary. The practice of adult educators for critical democracy entails tackling hidden agendas such as the focus on the individual at the expense of social commitment. Democracy will remain an empty ideal if individuals are unable to translate their everyday issues and concerns into genuine public debate and collective

action. As educators, we must show how the personal is political (Martin, 2003). Struggling for social change is at the core of human development, where education plays a key role. Changing social systems to create a critical, participative democracy is a formidable task, yet it has to start with recognising and empathising with the extent of the suffering that people endure in their daily lives (Connolly & Hussey, 2013).

As this chapter aims to discuss the characteristics of adult learning in the community, we will further address the relation between informal learning and public spaces to learn. Then, we will put adult learning in the context of the community and democratic engagement.

## 10.2 From *agorae* to niches and a digital learner: Innovative spaces of informal learning

For more than two decades now, the spaces of learning seem to have been becoming redefined. Today, they are less and less dependent on institutions, and have ceased to exist as simple places or courses and seminars. They have also become more diversified in terms of learning content, and not directly inspired by the need to follow competency-based market demands. In short, we may argue that public and community learning spaces have become much more permeated with informal learning, or vice versa, informal learning started to develop into subtle socially-constructed semi-physical spaces, stretched onto experiential and symbolic spheres of the relational universe. In her work and practice, Sabina Jelenc Krašovec was one of the significant proponents of this new concept, which entwined informal learning, space, democracy, communities and social activism. For example, Jelenc Krašovec and Gregorčič (2017) examined and used Schugurensky's idea (2013), in which informal learning is seen as "acquired through political participation, focusing in particular on the social dimensions of the acquisition of knowledge, attitudes, skills, and practices" (Jelenc Krašovec & Gregorčič, 2017, p. 402), in their own empirical study conducted in Slovenia. The authors empirically validated that "participation in the process of self-organization of citizens enhanc[es] engagement in civic society", within the scope of the study, led to knowledge and skills formation "that are necessary for social solidarity, intergenerational cooperation, awareness of others and social harmony" (Jelenc Krašovec & Gregorčič, 2017, p. 417).

From the early 2000s and especially since the 2008 economic crisis, in many European cities we witnessed the rise of learning niches that started taking place

within small learning and social movement communities/subcultures, such as hipsters. The hipster subculture, for example, used here as an umbrella term for various but similar trends and styles of living, distances itself from the complexity of modern society, often seeks new and alternative ways of looking, evaluating beauty and learning in order to confront the habitus of common culture (Rasmussen et al., 2012). Coffee shops, hubs and deserted/squatted areas thus became places of informal learning of young adults, offering exhibitions, movie projections, debates and also many learning circles that have risen spontaneously. As noted by McGivney (1999) "learning takes place in dedicated learning environments and non-educational settings. The location of learning often proved to be more important than its actual focus. Informal learning generated by local people themselves often led to wider community involvement and activism" (McGivney, 1999, p. 5).

Nowadays, we argue that people continue to change in dramatic ways with regard to both what and how they learn. Community-based learning and public open spaces for learning seem to be just the right setting for this kind of trend.

Within an ongoing race for learning new, very specific skills, only to witness them becoming disused, one may see more and more middle- and high-income people getting interested in learning how to *become*, and thus learning to know themselves more in depth (e.g., rise of the psychotherapy and counselling, coaching etc.), developing critical thinking, cognitive flexibility and achieving greater emotional intelligence and wellbeing. Demand for escapes from the neoliberal self in the form of festivals, adventure tourism, yoga retreats and a nomadic lifestyle seems to have risen even before the beginning of the ongoing COVID 19 crisis.

As specific jobs and knowledge/skills increasingly continue to become obsolete, and as the popularly known "Delors Report", i.e. "Learning: The Treasure Within", predicted more than two decades ago (Delors et al., 1996), learning-how-to-learn will come to be one of the most important personal assets. Additional attributes of a good adult learner, such as learning independence and self-directedness, may likely become the main navigation tools and essential lifesaving skills in a progressively greener and denser technological jungle. The technologies of the fourth industrial revolution will require these learning principles (Penprase, 2018), especially as artificial intelligence (AI) starts to take over more and more low- to medium-skilled jobs.

Moreover, according to Harari (2018), and in contrast to the rather limited number of information units attributable to previous technological epochs (e.g., due to censorship), today the average individual is faced with the noise arising due to the

massive amount of information that is available, including much misinformation, which one has to carefully navigate and then make sense of, in order to use it in any reasonable and relevant manner. As such, pretty much the last thing a learner needs today is more information.

More than having informal learning "occupying" large public open spaces, meta-phorically perceived through large forums and *agorae*, the trend may be the opposite – more learning taking place in small communities, i.e. subcultural niches. Hansman (2001) stated that "members of communities of practice may feel more connected to these small communities than larger organizational cultures" (p. 48). Engagement and identification with a group, as well as passion and commitment, are the cohesive values of these communities, "not organizational values or institutional schedules" (Hansman, 2001, p. 48). We believe that learning in smaller informal groups will be more likely to increase in the future, due to the rising particularisation and diversification of group and individual identities. This tendency towards niche identity particularisation may stem from the same processes that previously took over the market and consumer society, and consequently (or vice versa) the consumers' learned behaviour.

It can be hypothesised that these new niche learning spaces are above all relational, and thus that the learner is becoming an identity seeker or builder, looking for new group identity confirmation which involves new (ways of) learning to be and to learn. This proposition may be derived from findings that show that early experience in new teachers is "largely informal with strong emotional and relational dimensions associated with identity formation" (McNally, 2006, p. 80). These new "learning circles" are creating new aspects of inclusion, availability, diversity and opportunity for learning. They seem to be very diffuse, but possess the characteristics of intentionality and organisation. Together with other forms of informal learning in the community, they tend to be an alternative to the neoliberal concept of a society.

## 10.3    Learning in the community: A chance to empower educators and learners

As adult education at the institutional level became more rigid or adapted to market requirements, its emancipatory function has been left to the philosophy of adult learning to deal with. In our opinion, the learning process should be designed to provide social and personal transformation. Learning with others in the community has developed into the more organised format known as *communities*

*of practices* or *community-based learning*. As Merriam and Bierema (2014) explained, "communities of practice are made up of learners who have different levels of knowledge and mastery of the knowledge, behaviors, attitudes, and norms of the group" (p. 115). Within this chapter, we understand learning in the community as a learning format, even platform, which offers the possibility to reduce the negative effects of power relations in the process of learning. Moreover, we argue that the community of practice should be continually under critical reflection in order to recognise and transform the influence of neoliberal discourse. As such, it has characteristics of informal learning generated by the local people themselves, which often leads to wider community involvement and activism, encouraging people to continue organising and helping them become confident and successful learners (McGivney, 1999). Therefore, we refer to this as a self-organised learning activity undertaken with the purpose of developing the capacities of individuals and groups through their actions that are of the community interest. Consequently, it involves the transformation of the learning process itself, necessary to maintain its participatory and democratic nature while being carried out in public and open spaces.

We believe that learning in the community can be best described by capturing the main characteristics of such learning. These are related to the main differences between learning in the community and the learning which occurs in the educational institutions influenced by the neoliberal agenda. Those can be captured in the following (Dieser, 2013): the role of the facilitator, the role of participants, the learning process, and presentation of results and evaluation of the overall process. Building on the ideas of Sabina Jelenc Krašovec, further on we elaborate what we believe to be key features in relation to each of those elements to empower the democratic practices.

### 10.3.1   The role of the facilitator

Sabina Jelenc Krašovec (2017) posed the following questions: what should the role of an adult educator be in fostering informal learning in the community, and can we then speak of a public andragogue? She defined the role of a public andragogue as "a person who speaks and listens but at the same time also learns and writes about the importance of keeping the public and learning through public communication and acting" (Jelenc Krašovec, 2017, p. 12). Moreover, she argued that a public andragogue should keep their distance from market-driven adult education and learning, and move more towards creating learning in public spaces. A public andragogue is not someone who neither teaches, nor encourages political activism,

but rather somebody who encourages or initiates learning (Jelenc Krašovec, 2017). Instead of transmitting knowledge as in acquisitional learning environments, a public andragogue "opens up the possibility for cooperation, for 'human togetherness' which makes it possible for freedom of action to appear" (Biesta, 2012, as cited in Jelenc Krašovec, 2017, p. 11). A public andragogue does not encourage political activism, but should be seen as close to Giroux's central category of the transformative intellectual, which is based on the "necessity of making [the] pedagogical more political and the political more pedagogical" (Giroux, 2002, p. 3). The aim of public andragogy is to create self-reflective individuals open for critique, community, and innovative actions, which could improve the democratic processes in society. We could add that public andragogy should be placed somewhere between history and a possible future.

So, a public andragogue does not have the role of an expert, as they are not someone who transmits knowledge, gives directions or evaluates the learning process, but instead are also learners, and thus an equal member of the group. It can be said that the implicit goal and direction of the group in community learning is toward auto-facilitation. As Kennedy (2004) pointed out, each individual member of the group exercises leadership skills to some degree. Thus, "the role of the facilitator is to distribute his or her function, and thereby to become just another member of the group" (Kennedy, 2004, p. 13).

The facilitator thus strives to create a community by organising people to build what they want and need. They cooperate with the participants in the process of learning with regard to existing differences, various modes of oppression, structures of power and other relevant issues for the community. Moreover, as Jelenc Krašovec (2017) pointed out, such an individual should "be aware of possibilities of mutual learning among different social groups – intergenerational, intercultural, interracial, in some parts also a defense of native populations" (p. 12).

Thus, one of the main concerns of the facilitator is how to create supportive ensembles in all sorts of environments that generate individual and collective development. In short, it could be said that their role is all about creating a developmental learning environment.

The primary role of the facilitator is therefore to listen and explore the meaning of the community and related activities for each individual and the whole group. They should be interested in going beyond arguing and in creating conversations that bring people together, building the bridges between them. At the level of conversation, as Kennedy (2004) noted, "the facilitator is a coach and a catalyst for the

inherent *autopoiesis* of group dialogue" (para. 9). This author understands education as a group inquiry, and therefore argues:

> The traditional roles of the teacher as knowledge-deliverer, disciplinary or epistemic authority, inspirer, or even knowledge-triggerer […] may have local functions, but each of them will mean completely differently when expressed in the context of a group process which is understood as *autopoietic*, i.e. as a dynamic, self-organizing system. (Kennedy, 2004, p. 9)

## 10.3.2    The role of the participants

Learning in the community is based on the informal processes of learning which can be designed, guided and shaped by a skilful facilitator. However, what the outcomes will be and how the process will occur are not the responsibilities of a facilitator. The responsibility for learning is equally shared between the facilitator and participants, as the latter are also the creators, designers and shapers of such learning.

Sabina Jelenc Krašovec (2017) explained how obtaining liberating knowledge, which Santos (2014, as cited in Jelenc Krašovec, 2017) contrasts with order-oriented knowledge, is almost impossible today. Furthermore, its keystone of "solidarity is something that cannot even be imagined, it is unnecessary and dangerous" (Santos, 2014, as cited in Jelenc Krašovec, 2017, p. 10). Liberating knowledge is a goal in community learning, and in such a learning process learning how to collaborate is of ultimate importance. "Through participation in self-organised groups, members of different age groups can influence community development and change which is one of the important goals of community learning and cooperation" (Jelenc Krašovec & Gregorčič, 2017, p. 406).

In our opinion, there are two main elements to focus in developing solidarity and cooperation: activity and creativity. As Gregorčič and Jelenc Krašovec (2016) pointed out: "Through the process of participatory democracy, people learn a new political culture in which they are not only spectators but also actors, and in which the common good and the needs of the most marginalised members of society come before particular individual demands" (p. 177). Activity is so much more than just being an active member of the group. It is about manifesting agency, acting as a decision-maker, leader or initiator of group activity. Similarly, creativity emerges from collective activity. Every individual contribution is a part of the collaborative building of the learning process, the group and the people it includes. In one of

their studies Gregorčič and Jelenc Krašovec (2016) found that "the ability to make a collective decision and to engage in teamwork and cooperation were the most valued changes identified by the interviewees" (p. 177). In the process of learning, the skills of acting and creating are learned, they are the tools used to build the process, and at the same time, they are the result.

### 10.3.3    The learning process

The learning process in the community is not an "intervention", but rather the creation of such a project that supports the development of various skills needed for a complex problem-solving process in relation to issues relevant to the community (Dieser, 2013).

> Such learning mostly happens while participating in volunteer organizations, community and political organizations, intergenerational groups in libraries and other public spaces, in activities taking place in the public space, in the street; it happens in organized and unorganized activities, in a planned or uncontrolled manner, with a purpose or without it. (Jelenc Krašovec, 2017, p. 11)

It is the kind of learning that happens outside of educational institutions and organised and goal-oriented education, and as such is often unintentional and unconscious, encouraging the growth of tacit knowledge, which is crucial in the struggle for rights, as well as personal and community growth and development (Jelenc Krašovec, 2017).

In community learning, the facilitator and participant share the responsibility for teaching, learning and demonstrating knowledge and skills related to the learning content. For example, both are responsible for stopping and preventing repressive ways of practicing activities, developing skills for certain activities, and gathering information about different approaches, perspectives, and critiques of relevant issues (Dieser, 2013). In such collaboration an environment is being created where developmental learning becomes possible. Therefore, learning in the community is about generating the context in which each participant can critically relate to the world, create an understanding of how social and cultural structures determine their practice and explore new ways of thinking and doing. In such a process, the outcome is not of primary importance, as it is in acquisitional learning, where we aim to gain knowledge, skills and values. Therefore, the results of learning (knowledge, skills or values) arise simultaneous to the learning process (Holzman, 2018). We learn as we create an environment for learning.

### 10.3.4    Presentation and evaluation

Evaluation refers to both the process and the products created by the joint action of participants and facilitators. Likewise, assessment includes tangible achievements, public presentations, and demonstration of skills and understanding. Since it requires collaboration, construction and synthesis of information, as well as the performance of the collected knowledge, skills and wisdom, the learning process can be performed with groups, communities and associations (Dieser, 2013). As the educational content is created through a joint action of participants and facilitators in collecting primary sources, interviews and fieldwork, it is not uncommon that the cooperation expands from facilitators and participants to local community residents. The collected information is collaboratively evaluated, organised for presentation and further developed (Dieser, 2013).

The presentation and evaluation of a community learning project is best carried out in the form of performance. This idea is embedded in "the premise that all (or much) human practices are performed, and that humans, through performance, function as the active social constructors of their world" (Friedman & Holzman, 2018, p. 55). Acknowledging this, as Friedman and Holzman (2018) noted, a growing number of political and social activists, community and youth organisers, progressive and critical educators around the globe have been turning to performance as a way of engaging with social problems, activating communities and experimenting with new social and political possibilities. Performance is allowing educators and facilitators to organise communities, not around a set of ideas (i.e. ideology), but instead by creating something new with what exists. This is because performance is by its nature a creative social activity that allows people to break out of their usual routines, ways and practices and create new roles and rules. Consequently, performance can break through social barriers, unleash the imagination, and open doors to new possibilities.

### 10.4    Conclusion

The shift to adult education being replaced by adult learning with a lifelong learning philosophy, approach and practice (although also with the commodification of education) could be seen as an invitation for creating new learning spaces, the more democratic organisation of learning processes, and searching for different ways of becoming a responsible and proactive citizen. Peter Jarvis (2008) argued that "to have the experience of participation is to have a learning experience that enriches us as human beings […] and make[s] people aware of the common good, of the

community beyond our individuality [...]" (p. 168). Learning in the community opens the possibility to be in dialogue with different knowledge, value systems, world views, and diverse histories. It could help us create and test reality with the idea that we could change our power relations, open an honest dialogue and begin the process of collectively becoming creators of a more democratic world to live in.

Informal learning invites us to think about the importance of the role of public andragogues in improving democratic processes. The growing movements for the creative transformation of public spaces, the environment, and educational approaches do not diminish but in contrast strengthen the importance of an andragogue. In the self-organised learning process that takes place in the community, the boundaries between educator and learner become blurred. The public andragogue is a member of the community. Moreover, they are included in a creation of the community and the learning process, democratising the creation and use of knowledge. Learning in the community is an ongoing dialogue, the process of creating, becoming and transformation of the individual, group, and collective self. In the contemporary context, we believe that there is no individual liberation that can be divorced from community emancipation, and that their encounter point is represented by informal learning. Community learning spaces provide us with hope, the hope that conceptualising our practice in constant change with the power of imagination will move us further towards the transformation of existing forms of democracy.

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